

1961 Notes - (Sept. 17, 1976)

In 1961 - the year that program decisions had to be made on the size of the missile force, and the year of the Berlin Crisis - chickens began coming home to roost for the proponents of the Missile Gap. In normal, non-crisis times, the overwhelming concern of the Air Force, and of course of the aircraft and missile industry and the Congressional representatives closely associated with it, was to maintain and increase the size of the Air Force budget and in particular that part of it corresponding to what had become the most powerful faction within the Air Force, the Strategic Air Command.

In this context, high estimates of Russian bomber and missile capabilities and of their production programs and future force size were helpful, or virtually essential; the higher the better. Even where this did not lead to out-and-out deception - and it often did - it encouraged practices, some of which could be openly admitted, of emphasizing "worst case" possibilities, focusing on the upper limit of ranges of uncertainty, conceiving and emphasizing the possibility of various "crash programs" by which the Russians, if they departed from their normal production and installation practices, could deploy very large missile forces earlier than otherwise.

On the other hand, like all of those committed to the Cold War orientation, the Air Force was quick to see the likelihood or presence of "crisis" circumstances where confrontation with the Soviets was inescapable or desirable. And in such circumstances, like the rest of the military, the Air Force was anxious that the President should take a tough line, preferably backed up by ultimatums, and in particular ultimatums which relied upon the capabilities and

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possible use of their own service, bombers and missiles. But in this context of crisis, it was obviously not encouraging to the President to take such an approach if he had been led to believe that the Soviets had a far stronger military force than he did.

This was the dilemma facing Air Force commanders and estimators from the time of the Vienna meeting between Krushchev and Kennedy, in which Krushchev warned that he would turn over all control of access to Berlin to the East Germans by the end of the year, in connection with signing a peace treaty with East Germany. This threat came at the end of the meeting, after Kennedy had made an assertion to Krushchev which many military officers in the Pentagon regarded as disasterously weak, namely that for purposes of discussion, the nuclear forces of the two nations could be regarded as "equal." Krushchev, indeed, seized eagerly on this concession, not even hesitating to remark that in reality his generals told him that Russia was stronger, although in fact he must have been well aware that this was the reverse of reality.

Kennedy's critics in the Pentagon did not, indeed, fault the accuracy of his statement, though it was grossly mistaken. The Air Force itself, after all, had been the major proponent of such a point of view for some years and were still, in the Spring of 1961, exaggerating Russian capabilities in a way that appeared to validate Kennedy's statement. They were intensely dismayed, rather, that he should express openly to Krushchev what they were claiming to be the actual situation, since this "admission" obviously strengthened Krushchev's hand in bargaining. They felt that this showed a combination of naivete, with respect to bargaining procedure, and character weakness on the part of Kennedy. Nevertheless, they could

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not bring themselves to stiffen his spine in the manner they thought necessary by assuring him that his understanding of the strategic balance was in fact mistaken. Indeed, they could not bring themselves officially to recognize this themselves since the major decisions on the size of the U.S. missile force had yet to be made. To adopt with assurance what the Army and Navy had been saying for several years - that the U.S. was already greatly superior to the Soviets in strategic capability and that the Soviet Union showed no signs of attempting to change that situation - might have had the exact effect on the budget that the Army and Navy obviously desired, namely, to undermine the perceived necessity for an increased missile force, and perhaps radically to lower the size of the force that the Administration would procure.

This dilemma grew more intense for the Air Force as the crisis atmosphere deepened during the summer. Within the Administration, Dean Acheson, as a high level advisor leading a planning group with respect to Berlin, was urging strongly upon the President the necessity of standing fast in Berlin; conceding no change in our rights of access and refusing to accept the East Germans as responsible for guaranteeing those rights. Acheson stressed the desirability of being able to defend those rights militarily, if necessary, initially without using nuclear weapons. However, he emphasized equally strongly that in the face of superior Russian conventional force, the access could ultimately be guaranteed only if the President were willing to threaten the use of nuclear weapons in Europe to back up and compensate for the inadequacy of our conventional forces if necessary; and these threats could not be sufficiently credible, Acheson argued, unless

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the President were in fact committed in his own mind to the decision to use them if and when necessary, which would probably be quite early in any actual military confrontation.

My own feeling at the time, impressed as I had been by my own study in 1958-59 of the disastrous effect of the concessions at Munich, was that it was highly important to maintain our position in Berlin, if possible. I would never have agreed with Acheson that nuclear war in Europe or elsewhere was justified in this effort. But my increasing scepticism about the missile gap meant to me that this should not be necessary. Then in early September the National Intelligence estimate finally indicated that the Soviet ICBM capability was negligible. This seemed to support the possibility of a firm stand with respect to Berlin without raising the likelihood of nuclear war. But the Air Force's continued refusal to agree to this estimate and in particular the higher estimate given by SAC seemed to conflict with the likelihood of what I and the military agreed was a desirably strong position by Kennedy with respect to Berlin.

At about this time I happened to be visiting SAC headquarters in Omaha. I believe that I was at SAC to discuss the implementation of the MacNamara guidelines on changing the war plans, guidelines which in fact I had drafted with the help of some dissident Air Force officers, I believe in connection with the work of the Partridge Committee on Presidential Command and Control. I had a long discussion with a colonel who was then in charge of war plans for SAC, an officer I had known earlier in the Pentagon. In the

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course of the conversation he remarked how unhappy he and most of his colleagues were with the President's lack of resolve and toughness with respect to Berlin. He mentioned that the President was perceived as being scared by the prospect of nuclear war even though, as he remarked, his boss, General Power, Commander of SAC, had assured the President that if worst came to worst, a "pre-emptive attack on the Soviet Union would result in less than ten million casualties". ("Preemptive" meant "striking second first," or, supposedly, hitting Soviet strategic targets, in particular, offensive weapons, prior to and on the basis of clear warning of their imminent attack on the U.S. Jimmy Carter was quoted during the campaign as asserting that he regarded the first-use of U.S. strategic forces as justified in some circumstances, presumably these. Actually, in this context in 1961, it meant a first nuclear strike by U.S. strategic forces when confronted by a "challenge," possibly a large scale non-nuclear confrontation, in Europe: not necessarily involving an attack on the U.S., or any actual or imminent use of nuclear weapons by the Soviets. Air Force officers, in those days, never, never used the words "first strike," by the U.S. any more than CIA officials ever used the words "assassination" or "kill".)

The expression "less than ten million casualties" in deprecating the consequences of a policy, comes more easily to the lips of those associated with the U.S. Air Force than to most humans, but I was interested in pursuing the implications of what was, nevertheless, a strikingly low estimate. First of all, as he agreed, it obviously applied only to the United States, there could be no question of

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limiting casualties in Europe to any such figure, or indeed to less than fifty to a hundred million or more dead. (It later became clear, in fact, that the U.S. intelligence community had under-estimated actual Soviet missile forces targeted on Europe to the same degree that they had over-estimated Soviet capabilities against the U.S.; the Soviets had bought and were still increasing a force capable of making one large smoking hole of West Germany and most of the rest of Europe). It was typical then and now of U.S. strategists to leave European casualties out of the count in weighing the deterrent balance.

Even from the point of view of U.S. casualties, however, ten million was a strikingly low figure, inasmuch as one to two large warheads exploded in the New York metropolitan area alone could expect to produce those casualties. How could Power be asserting that the Soviet ability to strike back at us could be so limited, even in the event of the most perfectly executed U.S. first strike?

"Well, that is what he believes, and that is what he's told the President" said the war planner. "In fact, the Joint Chiefs have endorsed that view to the President. They told the President that he should understand, in going into his bargaining with the Russians, that he had the capability to back up his threats to that extent if worst came to worst."

Late in the discussion we turned to the question of the latest change in strategic estimates, which essentially adopted the earlier Army/Navy view that at most the Russians had "a few" nuclear missiles. I asked, "Why was the Air Force continuing to oppose this estimate?" "We just don't believe it," the Colonel told me. "There

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is too much evidence that they have more than that." Then he said "Do you know what the old man (General Power, Commander of SAC) thinks they have?" I waited to be told. "A thousand. He's sure they have a thousand. Right now."

I thought for a moment, then asked "How many does he think we know the exact position of?" As the colonel had already indicated, the Air Force and SAC's position was based in large part upon intelligence information, including production rates and estimates of capability, which did not indicate the actual location. In other cases there was electronic intelligence or other indications that gave a general area for the possible location of a missile site but did not pinpoint it for targeting. In yet other cases there was aerial photography that suggested a precise location of something that might or might not be a missile site. Argument over these had fueled the controversy for most of the year as to the total number of missiles. "Out of the thousand that Power thinks the Russians have, how many does he say SAC could target?"

"About two hundred."

"Two hundred," I repeated. I remember pausing for a moment before saying, "So that leaves about eight hundred ICBM's whose location we don't know well enough to target?" The colonel nodded. I said, "How does that fit with the estimate that we would have less than ten million casualties in a U.S. first strike?"

There was a very long pause while the Colonel looked at me expressionlessly. Then he said "That does seem to raise something

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of a problem, doesn't it?" A little later he said "You know, I'd like to hear you ask that question to the Chief of Intelligence here." He took me down to the Intelligence Section of SAC Headquarters where at last I met the fabled officer, as I remember, a Brigadier General who had been responsible for so long for pressing the extreme missile gap estimate and was still the holdout in the intelligence community. His deputy was in the room with us too, along with the Chief of War Plans. The Intelligence Chief was a former academic political scientist, very articulate, and clearly very conservative. We went through the same discussion of the regrettable weakness of the President's position on Berlin and then moved again into the area of missile estimates. He carefully attributed the estimate of a thousand to his boss rather than himself, though, of course, without distinguishing his own private opinion from Power's.

Finally I came up again with the question: "If our best first strike would leave the Russians with eight hundred ICBM's whose location we don't know, how could we limit casualties in this country to ten million or less?" Again this proved to be a conversation stopper, briefly, until he too agreed, "There does seem to be a discrepancy there." Eventually I suggested that by this discrepancy the Air Force was contributing to the very problem they were experiencing in getting the President to commit himself to a strong stand on Berlin. I pointed out that a lower estimate, rather than a higher one, was conducive to presidential confidence in a crises. At this there was a shocked response from the Intelligence Chief and his deputy as if I had committed the ultimate gaffe: "Are you

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suggesting that we alter the estimate, for political reasons?"

I managed to control my sense of the hilarity that this question was being voiced in the office from which SAC missile estimates proceeded; in responding I chose my words very carefully. "That was, of course, the last thing from my mind; I would hardly dream of suggesting such a thing. Only...there were, as they were clearly aware, ranges of uncertainty surrounding any estimate. To focus exclusively on the upper end of that range of that possibilities, or "to emphasize primarily the bits of evidence that pointed to the higher estimates of enemy forces, might be prudent and conservative procedure under most circumstances; but more generally, what constituted "conservative" practices in estimating always depended upon the context of purposes and circumstances. If an emphasis on certain unlikely possibilities undermined the President's confidence in a way that did not reflect a realistic understanding of the situation, one would have to expect that the President might act in ways that did not seem...desirable, appropriate, realistic."

"All I am saying," I said, still speaking very carefully, "is that if, on reflection, you find that you have been emphasizing only a part of the realistic possibilities you can see - or if you had been expressing a little more confidence in those extreme estimates than is actually warranted - you might want to correct that, to give the President a more realistic notion of the range of uncertainties."

Years later when I was interviewing General Power on the day of his retirement for the Kennedy Oral History he told me that in this period in 1961, he had gone to President Kennedy to urge a

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massive program of U-2 photography that would resolve "these uncertainties" once and for all by giving better photographic coverage than was available from satellite photography at that time. Such a program at that time would have been, of course, highly provocative; and, in the face of Soviet SAM capability by 1961, highly dangerous for the U-2's unless they were accompanied by direct threats that we would destroy the SAM's if the U-2's were interfered with. Power did not, as I recall, mention this aspect of his proposal, which must have been clearly implicit if it were not actually explicit.

To do such a program at the height of the Berlin Crisis would have been one of the most challenging actions we could possibly have undertaken, and this may well have been Power's tacit motivation for proposing it. Yet again, he like the rest of SAC and the Air Force hard-liners, would have been in a bind on that issue. I suspect that he would have regarded such a proposal as raising, in fact, very little risk, even of exacerbating the crisis, but this confidence could only reflect doubt in his own official estimates of Russian capability. On the other hand, he was justifying the proposal precisely on the necessity of resolving the uncertainty, that is, on the seriousness of the possibility that the Russians might have enormous numbers of missiles whose location was as yet undetermined. But that was precisely a possibility which made his proposed method of gathering information (U-2 flights being incomparably more provocative and more vulnerable than satellite photography) look intolerably risky to the President, above all in a period of crisis.

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The frustration experienced by the Joint Chiefs and particularly the Air Force Commanders must have been extreme. An overflight by U-2s - even if there were no film in the camera - was exactly the kind of secret action underpinning private and public U.S. threats that the military hardliners must have favoured the President's taking at that time. Yet they could make it look acceptably safe to the President (as they themselves undoubtedly believed it was) only by conceding that the Soviets had very few ICBM's, all of them of known location and vulnerable to our attack; and this the Air Force was not willing to do in the months while the Defense Department budget was being drawn up and the size of the proposed Minuteman force being determined by Secretary McNamara.

Meanwhile the crisis itself appeared very serious. The President's attempt to mobilize public opinion for a confrontation precisely by raising the serious possibility of nuclear war had back-fired gravely in public opinion. His decision to encourage a major fallout shelter program, in this context, was a major misjudgement, mobilizing instead great controversy, the Russians continued to affirm their determination to sign a peace treaty and turn over access to control to the East Germans, which was expected to lead to unacceptable conditions by the East Germans and a physical denial of access.